Listening Session for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging

Hosted by the Alabama Department of Senior Services
Monday, October 18, 2004
Birmingham Sheraton Hotel
Birmingham, Alabama

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Let me begin by thanking Ms. Irene Collins, Director of the Alabama Department of Senior Services, for leading the effort to host this listening session in conjunction with the annual conference of the Alabama Association of Regional Councils. We deeply appreciate this opportunity -- made possible by her leadership -- for Alabamans and others to participate in the planning for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

My remarks today are intended to achieve three goals: (1) to briefly describe Senior Service America and how we operate the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) in Alabama and elsewhere; (2) to suggest that SCSEP offers valuable lessons and implications related to each of the six key issue areas approved by the 2005 WHCOA Policy Committee; and (3) to strongly endorse the 2005 WHCOA Policy Committee's commitment to address the issues of poverty, race, and low education among older Americans.

About Senior Service America, Inc. and the Senior Community Service Employment Program.

Senior Service America is one of 13 national nonprofit organizations funded by the U.S. Department of Labor to operate the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). As the third largest national SCSEP grantee, we operate our program exclusively through subgrants to a diverse group of over 100 local government, community-based, and faith-based organizations in 23 states and the District of Columbia. Each year, over 10,000 low-income seniors participate in our program.

We currently operate SCSEP in the state of Alabama through subgrants to 10 member organizations of the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (AARC). This year, we will give over $3.8 million to these councils so they can provide paid, part-time employment to over 1,000 low-income Alabamans. Since the 1970s, our Alabama subgrantees have received over $90 million from Senior Service America and served nearly 30,000 seniors.

These seniors work in a wide range of local public and private, non-profit agencies serving their community. They provide an equally wide range of vital services, from tutoring children at libraries to staffing nutrition programs for the elderly, to helping job seekers at local One Stop Job Centers. Over a third of the seniors are placed into regular jobs not subsidized by our grant after leaving our program.

The success of our program in Alabama demonstrates the value of fostering genuine partnerships between national and local organizations. The AARC members that we fund also invest their own resources in the program, and operate SCSEP in a manner that best fits their local needs. They also receive technical assistance and training from Senior Service America. As a result, the federal grant leverages significant local resources (both in-kind as well as real dollars) in support of helping low-income seniors participate in the labor force.

In addition, Senior Service America works closely with the Alabama Department of Senior Services and its own SCSEP network. This partnership has proven to be highly beneficial to each organization.

Finally, I wish to comment on an issue raised by the previous speaker, Mr. James W. Curtis, Executive Director, East Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, testifying for the AARC. As Mr. Curtis stated, the U.S. Department of Labor has revised the rules and narrowed eligibility for SCSEP. We share the AARC's concerns about the way that the Final Regulations for SCSEP issued earlier this year are being implemented. I am happy to report that we think the U.S. Department of Labor is re-evaluating the impact that these new eligibility guidelines on the entire program and its SCSEP grantees, including not only our organization, but also AARP, Experience Works, and state agencies like the Alabama Department of Senior Services. In particular, we have asked USDOL to reconsider the SCSEP eligibility rules related to definition of family size, the inclusion of the previous 12 months' income rather than 6 months', and inclusion of unemployment insurance. We hope that by early next year, the U.S. Department of Labor will revise the eligibility rules with the support of the larger SCSEP community.

SCSEP and Six Key Issue Areas Approved by the 2005 WHCOA Policy Committee.

From the beginning, the Senior Community Service Employment Program has been required to serve low income, disadvantaged seniors 55 and over. Despite its targeted focus, SCSEP offers lessons that are relevant to developing policies in each of the six key issue areas approved by the 2005 WHCOA Policy Committee. A discussion of each of the issue areas follows:

Planning Along the Lifespan: SCSEP staff assess every participant in order to develop an individual employment plan to help them progress toward economic self-sufficiency. Also, SCSEP has no upper-age limit to be eligible to participate.

The Workplace of the Future: The goal of SCSEP is to help seniors re-enter or stay active in the labor market through both paid community service employment and regular employment unsubsidized by grant funds. SCSEP also works closely with the USDOL One-Stop Career Centers to provide training and job search assistance for older workers.

Our Community: Through the Final SCSEP Regulations, USDOL reaffirmed that the goal of providing seniors with community service opportunities is equal in importance as preparing them for employment. As mentioned previously, SCSEP participants are providing vital services that would not otherwise be available in the community.

Health and Long Term Living: Many of the SCSEP participants are assigned to work for nonprofit and public agencies that are part of the network of health services to older Americans.

Social Engagement: Some exemplary local SCSEP programs are models of innovative civic engagement programs, promoting intergenerational activities and cognitive vitality. Through employment in community service, participants can fight the isolation and loss of purpose proven to increase risk of illness and untimely death.

Marketplace: SCSEP works with public and private employers and promotes the hiring of older workers to fill part-time and full-time jobs.

In other words, the historic mission of SCSEP is closely aligned with each of the six key issue areas approved by the 2005 WHCOA Policy Committee. We urge the Committee to tap the collective expertise and experience of the SCSEP community as it proceeds with its work.

Poverty, Race, and Low Education Among Seniors.

We strongly support the 2005 WHCOA Policy Committee's statement that "issue development should include consideration of differences among the following variables: socio-economic, rural/urban, minority, cultural, linguistic competencies/literacy, and age cohort."

Although funding for SCSEP allows for 100,000 participants every year, this represents less than one percent of the seniors eligible for the program. All SCSEP participants fall below 125 percent of the federal poverty guideline, and many also are over 60, belong to a racial/ethnic minority, live in isolated urban or rural communities, and/or are without a high school diploma.

The statistics on poverty among seniors reflect significant progress since the first White House Conference on Aging: in 1953, 35 percent of all seniors fell below the poverty level. Now only 10 percent are poor – but that 10 percent still represents six million people.

Also, a larger percentage of seniors have achieved higher levels of education. In 1970, 20 percent of those over 65 graduated from high school, and in 2000, 70 percent over 65 were high school graduates. But we must not forget the nine million Baby Boomers who dropped out and didn't graduate from high school.

SCSEP can and does fight many of the persistent and pervasive stereotypes about older Americans, especially those who are poor, of color, and of low education. SCSEP participants are providing critically important services and helping to solve real problems in their communities. They are also helping to change attitudes toward aging. Seniors who are among the most disadvantaged in our society are in the forefront of building much-needed social capital in their communities. We urge the WHCOA to include SCSEP participants as well as SCSEP sponsors in its policy development activities.

In summary, I wish to thank Ms. Irene Collins, the AARC, and the White House Conference on Aging for sponsoring this Listening Session today. Senior Service America and its network of

over 100 local partner organizations in 23 states and the District of Columbia are eager to share our experiences and expertise serving low income seniors for the past four decades. Let's work together to develop policies that address all older Americans for the next decade.

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